



My Jewish Journey

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At Congregation Beth El of Berkeley, we invite diverse members of the Congregation to speak on Rosh Hashanah morning on “My Jewish Journey.” This is one of three congregation talks delivered this year.

There are three bases to the origins of my Jewish identity: my family, my study of Torah, and the larger Berkeley Jewish community.

Family first: I don’t remember a moment that I became aware of being Jewish - as I imagine it, I always knew I was Jewish, well because my family was. My parents led a very Jewish centered life — and seeing as they were the grown ups and my brothers and I were the kids, we all lived a fairly Jewish centered life — even in Berkeley in the 70’s the parents still got to drive the bus. Being Jewish was wound into our daily lives, albeit in a slightly odd Berkeley kind of way. For example, although our family did not always light the shabbas lights, on Friday there was an expectation that we all would be home for dinner, and that the meal would include a discussion of the week that had passed and our hopes for the upcoming week. Every year we celebrated Hannukah, but there tended to be a conga line involved. Births, b’nai mitvot, weddings, and death — all were wrapped in Jewish tradition and religion. And as time passed, the memories of how my parents handled these events provided a kind of beacon for my family — here is what is done now.

Next Torah: As I grew older, my Jewish identity became increasingly sustained by studying the texts that are part of our religious heritage. I study Torah, actively looking for guidance on how to lead my life, and fully expecting to find it. Which could be seen as odd, as I am a lesbian living in the 21st century, and the Torah was written in a very male dominated, heteronormative community a long, long time ago and far far away from here. But the human condition is the human condition, and so I do find guidance and lessons (and sometimes massive failures) in these books. Through study with rabbis Kahn and Stern and the Torah study community, I have learned that finding both lessons and failures in our texts is just fine. And that as long as we continue to ask our questions, the texts and the community will provide us support and assistance.

And finally, the larger Jewish community, and Temple Beth El in particular. Congregation Beth El has always been central to my family — the two things that both my brothers and I were expected to do was play jazz and go to Hebrew School. And as I got older and Judy and I had our own kids, we joined Beth El and it became an important part of my adult life. Now, Shabbat morning early services and Torah study are center posts of my week. Beth El has been here for my family through many events, joyous and painful, most recently providing support for our family as we weathered the death of my mother just a little over two weeks ago. The rabbis came and visited us in the hospital, gave us spiritual guidance, and helped us make decisions about how to honor her life and mourn her passing, and the community provided support and succor.

My Judaism has also provided guidance and support in my professional life. I represent men and women on death row. It is amazing work, and also at times both intellectually and emotionally difficult. I have a lot of books in my office, and two of the most important are my JTS Tanakh and a daily siddur. When other lawyers come in and see those books, they tend to be surprised - why would you want those here they ask. I tell them that when I feel stuck, defeated, like I cannot find another step forward, I remember to breathe and calm down, and then I open one of the books and read for a few moments, particularly the prophets. Remembering that others have struggled, persisted, and succeeded help me find a way forward.

Inevitably, talking about my relationship with Judaism needs to involve some study of Torah. The study of Torah is an odd, and somewhat contradictory thing for a solid, post-structuralist feminist like myself. But there are lessons in the Torah that can help us lead our better, or perhaps best, lives. So, today I want to touch briefly on the Levites, and the definition of the Levites as the Priest's helpers. The Levites are to protect the Tabernacle, protecting the Mishkan from the non-priests; and they are also to protect the community. protecting the Israelites from their own impulses.

And from where does the idea that we need protecting from our own impulses arise? Amidst the discussion of the Levites as protectors, we are retold of the fate that befell Aaron's two sons, Nadab and Abihu. These two young men were consumed by "God's fire" when they offered a strange fire in the mishkan. Why does the text emphasize the danger that God presents us with? Perhaps to drive home the import of the Levites and the functions they served in our community. And perhaps to remind us that none of us can be saved by our heritage alone, not even the sons of Aaron.

Do we have people playing a Levite role in our own lives, or in our modern society? Should we? What is that we need to be certain to protect, and what do we ourselves need to be protected from?

I have had some experience with Levites. About five months ago, my wife Judy and I were hit by a car. It was a terrible accident. There is much about this event that has changed our lives and the lives of our family — and one of the most unexpected is that we got to see the Levites in our lives. Our friends and family stepped up in such an amazing way, coming together within

hours of our being hit and figuring out how to take care of our family, our house, our dogs, our finances, basically everything that makes up our lives. And they did this without being asked, they just stepped in and took care of us. It is an amazing experience to realize that there are those people in our lives who are willing to care for us, protect us, help us - when we are our most scared and most vulnerable. We can not thank these good friends enough.